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## Native vs. Non-native EFL Teachers: Who Are Better?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*This paper discusses possible advantages of having Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) to teach English as a Foreign-Language (EFL) especially in Asian countries when they are often regarded as inferior to their Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) counterparts. A native speaker fallacy has emphasized that NESTs are better teachers of EFL and have put NNESTs at a disadvantage. Actually, NNESTs possess advantages that can make them better teachers for teaching English in an EFL/ESL setting connected with their own EFL learning experiences and with sharing the same first language and cultural background with their students. While considered to have lower English language proficiency and lower self-confidence compared to NESTs, NNESTs who have made the effort to become quality teachers can position themselves as ideal English teachers in their own environment.*

**Keywords:** NEST, NNEST, EFL, English as a foreign language, context of teaching.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English is one of the most important languages in the world. Nowadays, people, around the world, realize the importance of English and learn it for many and various purposes, such as to prepare for their future career, to continue studying abroad, or to make friends from other countries and to do business internationally. This phenomenon has contributed to the rising number of English learners in the world, hence increasing the demand for English teachers. Since most of the learners of English are now living in

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the places where English is learnt as a second or foreign language, most of the English teachers also come from those circles.

In Asian countries where English is taught-learnt as a foreign language, most of the teachers come from and are trained in their own home country, and many of them have had the opportunity to have ESOL training or have pursued higher degrees abroad especially in an English-speaking country. Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) are rarely found teaching in Asian countries especially in the poorer, less developed countries due to the lower salaries and benefits. However, in more prosperous places in Asia such as Hong Kong and Japan, there are many NESTs working and collaborating with local teachers as part of the government programs to improve the proficiency of English there.

Nowadays, private English courses and international schools or colleges have been established in most developing countries in Asia. However, they are usually too expensive for the general public because they generally hire NESTs to teach English in their schools. In their job advertisements, they clearly mention that they prefer to hire native speakers to teach English at their schools because they consider that native speakers are the best teachers to teach English. In the promotion for their schools they also clearly mention that it is NESTs who will teach English in their courses. NESTs have been used to attract parents to register their children as students in these schools or courses. This phenomenon has placed NESTs as superior and pushed aside NNESTs. There have been many long debates as to who is the better at teaching English in the EFL context: NNESTs or NESTs. In a much smaller group, [Medgyes \(1999\)](#) has defined NNESTs as those teachers whose English is their second or a foreign language, who are working in places where English is a second or foreign language, whose students are generally a monolingual group and whose native language is the same as their students. NESTs are defined as those whose English is their native language.

The native speaker fallacy which stresses NESTs as the ideal English teachers has put the NNESTs at a disadvantage. This view has put NESTs as superior to their NNEST counterparts and has affected the NNESTs' pedagogical and professional development. [Braine \(2010, p. 2\)](#) stated, "while the authority of the NS was accepted as the norm in English-speaking countries, there appears to be a power struggle between the expatriate NS teachers and the indigenous NNS teachers in the EFL English teaching context."

The movement of NNESTs first started in 1970s in the United States when the concept of a World English was initially introduced by Braj Kachru and Larry Smith ([Braine, 2010](#)). Since then, many NNESTs have been actively conducting research on NNESTs' issues, publishing their articles on English teaching issues and participating in international conferences and seminars as well as establishing international scale NNEST associations. In addition, [Braine \(2010\)](#) also mentioned some of their achievements. First is the upgrading of the NNESTs' self-esteem which has made them more confident with the NNESTs title attached to them. Second are the great achievements in academic research and publications by and about NNESTs, and finally, the achievement of their leadership in teaching TESOL. There are now NNESTs who take the lead role in some international organisations on ELT issues.

About 80% of teachers of English, teaching in the world today, are now non-native ([Canagarajah, 1999](#)). Even though the number of NNESTs has risen dramatically, the research about NNESTs has just recently started. [Braine \(2010, p. 2\)](#) mentioned that "despite the strong presence of NNS English teachers worldwide, issues

relating to them were not openly discussed or studied till a little more than a decade ago”.

According to various recent research studies about NNESTs, they are now seen as good teachers for teaching EFL English. They bring advantages to their classrooms especially when they share the same language and cultural background as their students and have had similar EFL English learning experiences as their students. However, NNESTs have faced many challenges in regard to their linguistic and pedagogical development as well as their professional growth. Therefore, some actions may need to be taken to improve their quality so that they can become ideal EFL English teachers and professionals in teaching ESOL.

This paper is a study about NNESTs teaching in EFL/ESL settings. The first part of the paper reviews the strengths of NNESTs. The second section looks into the challenges and problems faced by NNESTs. In the final part of this paper, some possible solutions to those challenges and problems are discussed.

## **2. METHOD**

In writing this paper, the literature-based methodology was employed. The writers reviewed some literature including books and journals related to NESTs and NNESTs: their strengths, weaknesses, challenges as well as opportunities. [Barrientos \(1998\)](#) mentioned that literature-based research is the process of gathering and assimilating, evaluating and analysing as well as formulating writer's arguments, and the process itself is constantly interrelated.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 NNESTs' Strengths**

NNESTs are considered ideal teachers to teach pronunciation and the rules of grammar. They also possess relevant English cultural connotations and have the capacity to tell which English sentences are acceptable or not. These characteristics have become very good features for the ideal English teacher. It is inevitable that NESTs bring advantages to an English class in an EFL context due to their high level proficiency in the English language. However, it is not merely these characteristic which makes an ideal English teacher.

With the aforementioned strengths, NNESTs bring several advantages to the EFL classroom and in some ways can better facilitate their students in learning English. This is because NNESTs possess some qualities which are not possessed by NESTs. Some advantages of having NNESTs teaching English in an EFL context are that they can be more empathetic, more sensitive and more understanding of their students since they share the same native language and the same cultural background as well as similar English language learning experiences. Another strength is that they are the model of successful English learners so they can be a source of motivation for their students. Finally, having themselves learnt the language previously they can comprehend which strategies are likely to work the best for their students, so that many of them can teach more successfully compared to most NESTs.

### 3.1.1 NNESTs Are More Empathetic, More Sensitive and More Understanding

To know your learners is an important factor to becoming a successful teacher (Oda, 1999). Compared to NESTs who acquired their English at their mother's knee rather than having to study it to start with, NNESTs have a better understanding about how hard it is to learn English as a foreign language. NNESTs were once beginning learners of English, too, and have gone through many difficulties and challenges with their studies. Having the same experience of hardship in learning English as a second or foreign language, NNESTs will usually have more empathy and better understanding towards the difficulties that their students may be encountering in their learning and hence can better help them overcome such troubles. This feature has been the main attraction of having NNESTs teaching English in an EFL setting. In addition, Ellis (2002, as cited in Moussu & Llurda, 2008) stated that good language teachers are those who have had experience with the acquisition and the use of a new language besides being good at linguistics, pedagogy and methodology so that they can understand the processes and the experiences that their students will have with learning their new language.

Furthermore, Medgyes (1999) has written that NNESTs are better at setting learning goals which are realistic for the students because they recognize the problems which are related to the national curriculum, the resources available and the examinations that they have to take. This will be very beneficial in the classroom since NNEST teachers can better help their students to set their learning goals and objectives. Having the same native language and cultural background has also been seen as another strength that the NNESTs bring to the classroom. Sharing the same background native language and culture enables NNESTs to build closer relationships with their students. One of the advantages of having NNESTs is that they are able to speak the students' native language and can make use of it in the classroom when necessary (Coombe & Al-Hamly, 2007). Even though there are debates about the use of the mother tongue in facilitating the learning of a second language, it is argued that the mother tongue, when used in the second language classroom can help teachers convey messages or lessons which are sometimes very difficult or impossible to do in the target language. Medgyes (1999, p. 439) mentioned that "...the native language proves to be a powerful teaching/learning tool in countless situations".

Furthermore, Harmer (2007) has suggested that the use of the first language in the classroom might give three advantages to the target language learners. Firstly, the use of their first language will cover all types of learners especially lower-level students since it is very useful when first language is used to talk about learning such as when doing a learning contract or doing a needs analysis. Secondly, the use of their first language will help students in making comparisons between their first language and English. Hence, for example, they can understand certain types of errors. Thirdly, the use of the first language can help teachers build a close relationship with the students, for example exchanging jokes.

It might be hard for NESTs with their limitations in understanding their students' native language to give examples and comparisons between English language and native language which is often needed in certain kinds of teaching-learning situations. Barratt and Kontra (2000, as cited in Moussu & Llurda, 2008) have said that NESTs are seldom able to show the students the comparisons and contrasts of English language with the students' native language.

In relation to sharing the same cultural background, NNESTs will help decrease the possibility of cultural clash between the teacher and his/her students which might happen when the teacher comes from a very different cultural background with his/her students. Medgyes (2001) confirmed that NNESTs have more information about their students than even very well-informed NESTs, which is important to anticipate and avoid the cultural clash and cross-cultural difficulties which can very possibly happen in a classroom.

It is clear that sharing a similar second or foreign language learning experience, and the same native language as well as the same cultural background are the main strengths of NNESTs. These are not usually possessed by NESTs even though they have been staying for a long time in the country.

### *3.1.2 NNESTs are Models of Successful English Learners*

In some countries where English is learnt as a foreign language and students' motivation for learning is low, English is considered to be a difficult subject and students are not sure that they can succeed in learning English and be proficient in it. To have NNESTs teaching in this kind of situation is a very good method to boost the motivation of the students. Students can see that the teacher who teaches them was once an English learner like them and is now a successful English learner. This can be a source of motivation for them. Motivation is one of the most powerful factors to get success in the teaching-learning process. Harmer (2007, p. 101) stated that motivation basically is an internal force which urges someone to do things to attain something; he further added that "nothing motivates like success".

Students will have self-confidence in learning English by having the real example of a successful English learner. Thomas (1999, p. 12) said that, "they (NNESTs) are role models; they are success stories; they are real images of what students can aspire to be". Furthermore, Edge (1988, as cited in Moussu & Llurda, 2008) states the importance to provide a real model to the students which are those who speak the students' native language and have had experience in studying and speaking English well.

## **3.2 Challenges Faced by NNS English Teachers**

NNESTs in their teaching practices have faced some challenges that gave impact to their processes to become ESOL professionals. These challenges can be internal and external. One very obvious external challenge is discrimination in the hiring practices where NNESTs are considered inferior to their NEST counterparts. Other internal challenges that might become constraints for them to become ideal English teachers are their possibly lower proficiency in English and their lower self-confidence as teachers of EFL English.

### *3.2.1 NNEST Teachers Considered Inferior Compared to Their NEST Teacher Counterparts*

NESTs are regarded as better and more qualified teachers in some countries where English is used as a second or foreign language. In some Asian countries, when someone is a native speaker of English, she will be considered as a more qualified



person to teach English. The requirement to be a native speaker is mentioned clearly and openly in some job advertisements for some courses, in some prosperous places such as Hong Kong and Japan. Braine (2010, p. 13) gave examples of job advertisements in a popular English newspaper in Hong Kong, “the (advertisement) headings make no bones about the primary qualification for the positions: Native English Teacher, Native Teachers, Native-Speaking English Teachers, Native English Private Tutor”. Thus, it can be seen here how NNESTs are still being discriminated against in the hiring process and how NESTs are still considered to be the best teachers to teach EFL English (Canagarajah, 1999; Liu, 1999).

Many private English courses and colleges are now operating in Asian countries. In some rich Asian countries, many NESTs are hired to work there and they get relatively higher salaries compared to NNESTs. Even in some developing countries, some private and international schools prefer to hire NESTs rather than NNESTs. They promote the presence of NESTs to attract parents to register their kids to study in their schools. This situation has helped the spread of the native speaker fallacy by those institutions.

Furthermore, in conferences and seminars, it is rarely found that the key speakers or resource persons are NNESTs. A conference or seminar will attract more participants when the presenters are NESTs. According to this fact, Braine (2010) mentioned that NNESTs also rarely become the key speakers at English teaching conferences. Interestingly, some of those conferences are organized by the local or NNESTs’ organizations. It seems that there is a situation where sometimes NNESTs or local teacher organizations help spread the native speaker fallacy even wider.

### 3.2.2 *Low Proficiency of English*

Some research done on the self-perception of NNESTs reveal that they themselves consider NESTs are better to teach English. This perception has affected the teaching performance of NNESTs especially in their linguistic skills. Butler (2007, as cited in Moussu & Llurda, 2008) in one of his studies in Japan found that 60% of his NNEST participants believed that English was best taught by NESTs, and interestingly, those who thought that the NESTs are the best English teachers also believed that they, themselves, had lower proficiency in English. Additionally, in a study done by Moussu (2002), it was found that in general, the NNESTs were not confident with their skills and their strengths, even with their grammar skills which are considered as one of the skills that NNESTs are very good or the best at.

There are some constraints that might become problems faced by teachers in an EFL context in improving their English proficiency. One of the most distinctive barriers is the lack of exposure that these teachers have had to an English speaking environment since English is not usually spoken in public in countries or states where English has the status of a foreign language. The NNESTs cannot easily talk to other people in English and find it hard to find books, magazines, newspapers or TV programs in English. It is even more difficult for those teachers who work in remote areas where the chances of meeting someone who speaks English are very slight and access to technology use is lower than in the big cities. These problems are not so great in states where English is a second language, e.g. Malaysia and states in India.

Another problem is that some teachers are still reluctant to communicate in English among themselves or with other people. Even though there might be

opportunities to talk in English, they feel not confident or shy to do so and even sometimes the case is that they do not want to do it for various reasons such as that they will be considered arrogant or prideful because they sometimes prefer to use English instead of their local native language.

### *3.2.3 Low Self-Confidence*

The feeling of inferiority and believing that NESTs are always better as English teachers have decreased the self-confidence of some NNESTs. [Reves and Medgyes \(1994\)](#) have mentioned that when NNESTs constantly under-rate their strengths in the use of English, it can create a bad self-image which in turn will influence their performance in the use of the language and finally might lead them to an acute feeling of being inferior to their NEST counterparts. Furthermore, studies have shown that NNESTs admit the NESTs are often better in pronunciation, listening, vocabulary and reading, and they recognise that they can face problems with their English language and they also admitted that they felt that this contributed to lower performance in their teaching practices ([Braine, 2010](#); [Reves & Medgyes, 1994](#)).

## **3.3 How to Improve the Quality of NNESTs?**

Some steps need to be taken to improve the quality of NNESTs so they can be better professionals in their field. Some methods which can be used to enhance their English language proficiency involve teachers linking up in teacher groups or associations and collaborating together to improve the performance of NNESTs whenever possible.

### *3.3.1 Enhancing English Proficiency*

As lower proficiency than NESTs in their English language has been considered as one main constraint for the NNESTs to become better English teachers, some steps should be taken to improve their language performance. [Medgyes \(1999\)](#) stated that to raise the confidence of NNESTs, they should develop their English proficiency to become near-native. [Ningsih and Fata \(2015\)](#) said that having professional competence means that the teachers should have an excellent capacity for mastering learning materials which will enable them to help their students to achieve the highest standards of competence as specified in the national curriculum. Furthermore, cognitive competence is also vital to achieving higher language proficiency. These competences include the teacher's knowledge on the subject as well as the approach, teaching methodology, and techniques that are employed ([Usman et al., 2016](#)). [Reves and Medgyes \(1994\)](#) mentioned two ways to enhance their proficiency which are frequent exposure to authentic native language environments and in-service training programs which are proficiency-oriented.

Motivation for self-development is very important for improving their English proficiency. Watching English programs and movies as well as listening to English programs and news, and reading English newspapers and books as well as transcribing good English when making notes and preparing lesson plans are good ways to improve their English skills. To improve speaking skills, teachers can talk to their colleagues in English and practise public speaking in English in public with a club like

Toastmasters™ (Nawi et al, 2015) or in private in front of a video-recorder in a hand phone and playing it back for self-evaluation. To be better in reading, they can read newspapers and books in English, both hard copy and soft copy from the internet. However, NNESTs in isolated rural areas will sometimes find such activities difficult to do due to lack of access to resources. Also some teachers do not make enough time available since they say they are too busy with their family and other activities. Braine (2010) mentioned that many teachers keep saying to the students to make as many opportunities as possible to get close to real, authentic English environments by reading English newspapers, books and magazines and by watching TV and DVDs and by logging onto the internet for example, but in actual fact, they do not really practice what they preach to their students. However, when teachers really want to develop and empower themselves to be better English teachers, they will make whatever efforts are needed no matter what limitations there are.

### *3.3.2 Raising Self-Confidence*

When NNESTs already have good proficiency in English, it will automatically contribute to the development of their self-confidence in teaching English. Additionally, they should be aware of the positive sides of their being NNESTs and how they can be equal or better than their NEST counterparts in terms of English language proficiency. In regards to this issue, Reves and Medgyes (1994, p. 364) said “furthermore, Non-NESTs have to be made aware of their own advantageous potential as language teachers in comparison with NESTs, in order to help them assume a more favourable self-perception”.

### *3.3.3 Professional Organizations*

Being involved in teachers’ organisations or affiliations can contribute to the professional development of NNESTs. Their involvement in such organisations particularly in NNEST organizations will help them improve their proficiency, where they can work together to be more professional in their field. Braine (2010, p. 88) said that:

...convince them, (NNESTs), that membership and active roles in professional associations will establish a sense of comradeship with fellow English teachers who are mainly NNS, (will) enhance their links to the wider world of English language teaching, and help them overcome any sense of isolation and disillusionment with the profession. In a nutshell, this will lead to their empowerment. (Braine, 2010, p. 88).

Teachers’ associations are beneficial for NNESTs in various ways. They offer opportunities for these teachers to empower and develop their professionalism. Harmer (2007) mentioned two possible opportunities for the professional development of NNESTs. Firstly, by being involved in such an organization, teachers can participate in conferences and seminars where they will have opportunities to learn and to share their experiences with other NNESTs from other places and also they can find solutions to problems that they may have in the field of teaching EFL English. Secondly, teachers



can submit and present papers for teachers' association meetings which are an excellent media to reflect upon teaching practices.

### 3.3.4 Working Together with NESTs

There is a situation in schools where English lessons are taught by both NESTs and NNESTs which can bring advantages to both parties as well as can benefit the students. Since both NESTs and NNESTs bring their own strengths into the classroom, the collaboration of these counterparts can be very beneficial. One way of collaborating can be by establishing team teaching, where NESTs and NNESTs can work together to improve the English proficiency of their students. Medgyes (1992, p. 349) asserted that "given a favourable mix, various forms of collaboration are possible both in and outside the classroom; using each other as language consultants for example, or teaching in tandem". Furthermore, Braine (2010) stated that team teaching is one of the most effective forms of collaboration between NESTs and NNESTs.

During team teaching, NESTs can gain some advantages from their NNEST counterparts. One of the advantages is that they can practise their English which is difficult to do when they cannot find people to talk to in English in their contexts, and at the same time, improve other aspects of their language skills. Students can also benefit from team teaching in that they can have more inputs and their learning becomes more authentic because of the interaction of the two teachers (Braine, 2010).

However, there are times when NESTs and NNESTs can find it difficult to do good collaboration in teaching, for example where the NNEST works as an interpreter rather than as a partner for the NS. Another problem might be that there is not sufficient training for both the NEST and the NNEST to practice how to do good team teaching together. When NNESTs can improve their performance in teaching EFL English, especially their English proficiency, they can become much better EFL teachers with all the other good qualities that they have.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Both native and non-native English teachers (NESTs and NNESTs) ideally should have equal opportunity to become ideal English teachers in the context of EFL. Good command of English and teaching skills as well as good personal qualities will make an ideal English teacher. NNESTs with their strengths can be a very good resource for English language teaching-learning as well as ideal English teachers especially in EFL settings. NNESTs should be willing to learn more and practice more to improve their abilities, especially their proficiency and self-confidence in teaching English. Additionally, joining and being active in an NNEST organisation as well as being willing to share with and learn from both NNESTs and NESTs are very good ways to improve their professionalism in EFL teaching-learning. If they can join and become active in an English speaking public speaking club like Toastmasters International™ which has thousands of branch clubs in cities all around the world will also really help NNESTs to improve speaking English in public and in class, and will boost their self-confidence and leadership capabilities which are essential to become a great teacher.

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